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Lie Detection Gets Doubtful Eye

By Dan Morgan
Staff Reporter

A Congressional study of lie detection has failed to produce evidence that the polygraph heralds a brave new world of instant truth.

Expected soon from Rep. John E. Moss's (D-Calif.) House Subcommittee on Government Information is a recommendation that lie detector tests be halted in government, except in the most serious national security or criminal cases.

In seven days of testimony early this year, the Moss group found no scientific proof that the polygraph, as now used, is effective.

Some of the Congressmen feel the system is more of an occult art than a science.

Hope for Improvement

The subcommittee would like the President to name a blue-ribbon committee to either justify or condemn lie detectors in government once and for all. Meantime, the members hope there will be immediate improvements in the training of Federal operators, and assurances that the tests be truly voluntary. (In this vein, the Moss group was told that a Washington policeman, under suspicion of misconduct, might be cited for failing to obey a superior if he refused the test.)

The subcommittee's interim report will come at a time when the polygraph industry and its corps of "examiners" is mushrooming, in and out of government, with only minimal controls and standards.

Here in Washington, a carry-out chain routinely subjects petty cash handlers to a polygraph test, whenever shortages develop. Bus companies and drug chains around the country regularly screen job applicants with the device.

A Dallas firm specializing in polygraph tests proudly announces on its letterhead that it is diversifying into "janitorial services," or trash in-

spections.

An enterprising aircraft executive suggested giving passengers boarding planes a quickie polygraph to determine if they are carrying bombs.

Over 20,000 Tests Given

In 1963, 19 Federal agencies administered 20,000 tests, primarily for security reasons. Countless other pre-employment tests, as well as security checks, were given by the Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency, exempted by statute from disclosing the number.

Even critics rely on the device. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover said recently "there is no such thing as lie detection"—but the FBI administered 2314 tests in 1963.

As a backdrop to widespread government use of the machines was the following testimony culled from the Moss hearings:

- In a scientific nation that relies on facts, not assumptions, verified data on the accuracy of lie detector findings is inconclusive.

- There is a strong probability that readings can be influenced by such factors as hypnosis, drugs, training for the test, the sex or race of the examiner, fluorescent lights, the subject's physical condition and his sense of right and wrong.

- The polygraph, when used in lie detection, measures only the subject's breathing, blood pressure and skin resistance to electricity. It ignores other indicators whose readings may be incompatible with these.

Other factors include eye movement, pupil diameter, muscle tension, skin temperature and pulse.

The subcommittee also was told that the personal prejudices of the examiner may even influence the readings.

Before categorically discrediting the polygraph, the subcommittee wants to hear more testimony on the role of the lie detector as a "fear object"—an electronic blackjack that may induce confes-

sions from persons unfamiliar with its real capabilities.

Fordham University psychology professor Joseph F. Kubis already has testified that "the instrument assumes the character of a blindly probing instrument that can severely damage the inner life or reputation of the tested."

He said use of lie detectors was "generally unwarranted," and added that there are very few experts around.

Yet, regulations governing their use and setting standards for operators are a mish-mash. One Federal agency requires operators to have only six days of training, though the head of a six-week school for polygraph examiners admitted six months is a "minimal" requirement.

By and large, the standards for examiners are set by the

polygraph schools themselves. Only three states license operators and only four others prohibit public or private groups from using lie detectors.

Because it is unwilling to put a stamp of approval on an unproved system, the Moss subcommittee probably will steer away from suggesting that licensing requirements be established for Federal operators.

One reason is that there was no agreement whether professional degrees, experience in interrogation or experience with the machine is the best guarantee of accurate interpretation.

What constitutes polygraph's rate of accuracy itself remained in disagreement throughout the hearings.

Polygraph practitioners claimed 95 per cent or better, but a Defense Department study by Jesse Orlansky found that it has proved statistically impossible to verify the success of the device—though 200,000 tests have been given in the last ten years.

No Understating

Orlansky did not underestimate the difficulty of verifying the device's success in providing information on which to base such things as employability and reliability.

In criminal cases, Orlansky reported, judgments based on the polygraph often cannot be verified. When validation is possible the accuracy of lie detection ranges from 50 to 85 per cent.

In one case checked by him, a claim of 100 per cent accuracy was found to be based on the polygraph operator's turning up one thief among 90 college girls examined.

Orlansky also found evidence that counter-measures, such as those that might be used by enemy agents, may de-

ceive an examiner and reduce the effectiveness of the test. In one experiment cited by Orlansky, subjects who were thinking of a number between one and 10 were able to fool the operators trying to guess the number up to 80 per cent of the time, by tensing their muscles on hearing a decoy number called.

A similar result was obtained by the subject's thinking of exciting imagery when the operator mentioned the decoy numbers.

Polygraphs, whose legitimate use in measuring bodily

changes in animals undergoing experiments has never been questioned, do not lie. But one of the strangest examples of an operator misinterpreting what the machine reported involved a bank vice president who, under persistent questioning during a test, confessed to a theft he did not commit.

The examiner saw positive readings on the graph when the official was asked if he had stolen from the customers, and concluded the official was guilty. He finally confessed to stealing \$1000. An audit disclosed nothing was missing.